



**State of Florida  
Department of Children and Families**

**Ron DeSantis**  
Governor

**Chad Poppell**  
Secretary

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**DATE:** February 14, 2020  
**TO:** Members of the South West Florida Refugee Task Force  
**FROM:** Janet Blair, Refugee Services (RS)  
**SUBJECT:** February 12th Meeting Minutes

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**THE NEXT TASK FORCE MEETING IS SCHEDULED FOR:**

**Date:** April 29th, 2020  
**Time:** 1:00-3:00pm  
**Location:** SWFL Community Foundation  
2031 Jackson Street, Suite 100  
Fort Myers, FL 33901

**Contact:** Janet Blair  
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This task force has been active in the South West Florida area for many years. The participants are representatives of various government agencies, private not-for-profit organizations and mutual assistance associations. An average of 15-20 people attend these meetings on a regular basis. The purpose of these meetings is to increase awareness of the refugee populations, share best practices, build collaborations between agencies, spot trends in refugee populations, characteristics or movements, help create good communication among service providers; get informed about upcoming community events, request for proposals, training, workshops, conferences, etc., at the local, state and national level; discuss refugee program service needs and possible solutions to meeting those needs. Meeting participants also receive updates, information and clarification on new federal and state regulations and policy changes pertaining to refugees. If there are any issues that you would like to include in the agenda, please contact me at the above address.

*I look forward to seeing you at the next meeting!*

## SWFL REFUGEE TASK FORCE MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was held at the Department of Health in Sarasota. Janet Blair, Community Liaison, represented the Dept. of Children & Families (DCF). Twelve people were present and the meeting was called to order at 1:05.

### **PRESENTATIONS**

- The first presentation was given by Jacquie Mathews from LSF. She gave a brief overview of the new mentoring program. The mentoring program serves refugee youth ages 15-24 and provides them with role models for career planning and advancement as well as assisting with acculturation and life skills. LSF has been focusing on launching the program in Naples and Fort Myers first and then will open a program in Sarasota. At this point, there are only a few youth recruited and a few volunteers willing to serve as mentors. Two recruiting events have been held and more outreach is planned.
- The second presentation was given by Melissa Jaramillo from Step Up for Students. This program provides five different programs for children in grades K-12 and currently has openings in all of them. Scholarships are available for both transportation to public schools outside of the student's assigned district and for private school tuition. More information and applications can be found at [www.StepUpForStudents.org](http://www.StepUpForStudents.org)

### **PROVIDER & COMMUNITY UPDATES**

- Cathy Joyce from the Sarasota Refugee Health Clinic discussed the decreasing number of clients being served due to the policy of completing refugee assessments prior to 90 days. Only one client has been seen this year due to the fact that all clients are being detained and are not released until after the 90-day period expires. In addition, clients are reluctant to apply for Medicaid or other benefits due to concern about the new public charge policy being enacted later this month. Clients without Medicaid are being referred to community health centers. However, they are not always receiving the medical screenings or vaccinations that the health department can provide. At times, LSF is providing clients with funds for obtaining vaccinations.
- Don Jarrell of USCIS shared information on the new Public Charge policy which goes into effect on February 24<sup>th</sup>. Although refugees and asylees will not be impacted by this policy, it is not yet clear how it might impact Cuban/Haitian Entrants and Parolees. Additionally, the increased fees for Naturalization and other USCIS forms will also be

- going into effect in the next 3-4 months and most fee waivers will no longer be available. Due to the increased cost as well as increased denials due to English levels and civics knowledge, it is recommended that clients only apply for Naturalization when they are fully prepared for the written test and the interview. Finally, it was also announced that an asylum office will be opening in Tampa by the end of this year.
- Lutheran Services, Florida's SWFL Comprehensive Refugee Services program in Sarasota shared that they are currently serving 255 clients. They are seeing an increase in both Haitian and Venezuelan arrivals. Bradenton is a location for Venezuelan asylees to settle and the Sarasota office has seen 32 Venezuelans so far during this Federal Fiscal Year (FFY). The Sarasota office is moving to collocate with another LSF program on February 19<sup>th</sup>. The new address will be 5104 Lockwood Ridge Road, Suite 303, Sarasota 34234.
- Finally, Mike Day from DCF shared that the office in Bradenton will be closing in June. Prior to closing, the office will operate 3 days per week. There is also a possibility that the Arcadia office will close later this year. Also, clients should be wary of organizations and individuals offering to assist them with online applications. Not only are large fees charged for this assistance, but personal information is given out which can create other problems.

**NEXT MEETING:** April 29<sup>th</sup> at 1:00pm at the SWFL Community Foundation  
Located at 2031 Jackson Street, Suite 100 in Fort Myers

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